

# OLD TOWN

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The street was of contemporary design—complete with contemporary filth. The filth contained no refuse (the big, white city sanitation trucks had swept the refuse away), but the unremovable stains of a big city—the scum and the condensed fumes clung steadfastly.

The street was there for two purposes: one, to support a start-stop spurt of rubber-bottomed, metal-clad, gut and blood-filled, exhaust-belching cars.

The second reason for the street's existence was not so concrete. It was as if the city were once an aggregate of buildings (like a single-layered pile of blocks with no space between), and the street, along with its brothers, had darted in and out of the clusters like small rivers grooving out the mud of a delta. Each rivulet had many children on her banks and usually baptized them with no other first name than a number. Their surnames were always distinctive, however, and this particular street called her cement steel offspring North Wells.

But it was many years ago when the buildings were born and named. The Brothers North Wells became old men. They had lived full lives and were ready to die, but something happened so that the wrecking crews were never called. The students and immigrants and artists and thinkers found the old places cheap to live in and came in hordes.

The young people of the mind and the Old Town of North Wells Street were compatible lovers, and they lay together along the filthy street. And out of the filth grew the flowers.

The flower-people were different and interesting, and now tourists came and stared almost as at the circus or zoo. The outsider with his fine sport coat and tie, camera and full wallet stumbled about like the Cyclops Polyphemus with one big, dazzled eye.

Some of the Brothers North Wells were changed into discotheques and top-less go-go bars and coffee houses and swank restaurants.

But most of the venerable old buildings stayed the same: the tiny antique shops, the old art studios, the quaint restaurants with foreign accents. Order was nonexistent, but no one cared. Square and flower-men smiled at one another (both secretly despising, yet envying the other). The filthy street divided two crowds—one examining the rhythmical undulation of sweaty, sweet breasts; the other examining their lives with heads bowed, emotionally urged on by a man of the Lord.

The Old Town of North Wells Street became the catharsis of a city through a never failing excitement. The executive with an ulcer and his middle-aged wife with hidden gray hair basked in the warmth of spirited jazz and more spirited whiskey. A little girl, blond hair very straight and long, munched a soft pretzel and sipped an Italian lemonade. She was fifteen: a week ago she was a girl, now she was a woman. Her mini-skirted loins thumped with excitement at the thought of last Saturday night and her "initiation into womanhood." At least that was how Tommy Vatsayana had explained it.

Everyone laughed in Old Town. You had to laugh. It was the biggest and wildest circus on earth. It had the wildest freaks and the most beautiful women. It was a never-ending show. Even the filthy street was not noticed in the din.

Lights were everywhere. They flashed and blinked and dazzled. Both neon and incandescent tubes spelled out commands, pointing, pleading. The whole rainbow and all the stars, the sun, the sky had mixed, clashed, mutated, splashed over the whole street.

Old Town's smell was like the rest of the city but distinctively more flavorsome. The aroma (or odor, depending on viewpoint) was a mad concoction of Hungarian goulash, sweat, beer, incense, and soft pretzels.

But even in the gay flower-town of North Wells Street exploitation was not unknown. The bearded young fellow wore a necklace of fresh blossoms, and a white candle flickered in his hands. He sat on the curb and meditated freedom while the invisible puppet-strings of a profiteer played him as a breathing neon sign. The little shops began to charge prices far above a fair charge.

But even with the exploitation, the excitement of Old Town was real, personal, irresistible. It was the excitement of people and existed because people are exciting. It was the mad circus on the filthy street called North Wells.